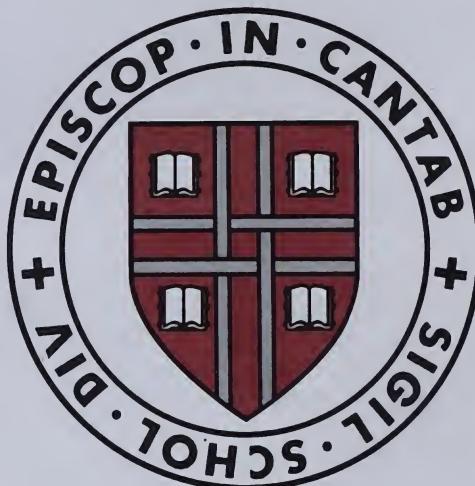


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**Becoming Fully Human: An Ethic of Relationship
in Difference and Otherness**

Denise M. Ackermann



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BECOMING FULLY HUMAN: AN ETHIC OF RELATIONSHIP IN DIFFERENCE AND OTHERNESS

Denise M. Ackermann

About the Author

*Denise Ackermann is Professor of Practical Theology at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. She has two abiding academic interests. The first lies in the development of a feminist theology of praxis in her context. Her publications reflect this interest, particularly two co-edited books entitled *Women Hold up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa* and *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*. At present she is writing a book which focuses on a feminist theology of praxis in post-apartheid South Africa in which lament is a central theme. The second is a passionate commitment, as a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, to participating in the main aim of the Circle, namely the promotion and encouragement of women writing theology in Africa. The Cape Town chapter of the Circle has just completed a research project on the topic of "Context, Identity and Spirituality" which will appear in book form later this year. In addition to the above interests, her greatest joys are walking in the mountains and playing with her granddaughters.*

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Prologue: A Fragment from South African Church History¹

The Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape Colony was faced with a dilemma in the early nineteenth century. Differences of race, history, and social circumstances created tensions among its ranks. In 1829 this church had resolved that Holy Communion was to be administered "simultaneously to all members without distinction of colour or origin." Sadly, the rift between the settler community and the indigenous people, many of whom were slaves, eventually caused the church to bow to social pressures. Race proved to be stronger than religion. In 1857 the synod of the Dutch Reformed Church passed the following resolution:

The Synod considers it desirable and scriptural that our members from the Heathen be received and absorbed into our existing congregations wherever possible; but where this measure, *as a result of the weakness of some*, impedes the furtherance of the cause of Christ among the Heathen, the congregation from the Heathen, already founded and still to be founded, shall enjoy its Christian privileges in a separate building or institution.

This paper was delivered at the plenary of Section One "Call to Full Humanity" of the 13th Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion on 20 July 1998. © Denise M. Ackermann, 1999.

For “the weakness of some,” read the racism of some white settlers. Thus the separation of believers along race lines began, a separation which ultimately led to the theological justification of apartheid.

Why Difference, Why Otherness?

The theme of Section One of the 1998 Lambeth Conference “Call to Full Humanity” is wide enough to cover every facet of human experience and our six sub-themes, every one of them critical and weighty, could keep this entire conference more than fully occupied for the next three weeks. My task is daunting and I have had to make choices. Undoubtedly my choices are affected by the context in which I have lived my life and by my understanding of the fundamental question which undergirds the themes in this section of the Lambeth Conference: “*What does it mean to be truly human, as an individual, in a community of faith, in this world?*”

Being a white South African woman who has lived through decades of apartheid in a multi-cultural, ethnically and religiously pluralistic society and who has known the sweet smell of democracy only very recently, it may come as no surprise that the central theme of my paper is about *the search for an ethic of relationship in difference and otherness*. I want to explore how we can live respectfully, lovingly and creatively across our differences, in communion with one another.

Few issues have exercised so powerful a hold over the thought of this century as that of “the other” or what is known as “the problem of difference.”² To speak of difference and

otherness is immediately a problem of language. Other than whom? Different from what? Am I the norm and those who do not confirm to my norm “the other” or “different?”³ Today this problem has taken a prominent place in philosophy, theological ethics and anthropology, and has penetrated deeply into our reflections on our religious practices.

I do not, therefore, see the theme of *relationship in difference and otherness* as limited to my context. The problem of difference lies at the heart of the inability of human beings to live together in justice, freedom, and peace. As we approach the end of this millennium we can look back on a century (ironically termed ‘the Christian century’ by the modern missionary movement) in which more people have suffered and died in war and conflict than ever before in human history. “To be alive today is to live with pain... We live in a world come of age, a world no longer innocent about the suffering human beings can inflict on each other,” writes Rita Nakashima Brock.⁴ We are a broken world, a world in crisis, an age which is difficult to name.

In this paper I want to look at the nature, problems, and potential of otherness and difference before proceeding to the central question, namely an ethic of relationship in otherness and difference. As I am a theologian who is primarily interested in the practice of the Christian faith, I want to conclude by examining some of the practical implications of such an ethic in our search for full humanity, as individuals, in our communities of faith, in this world. As I draw on the South African experience throughout this paper, I invite you to think about your own contexts.

Problematic Responses to Thinking about Difference and Otherness

The fact of difference elicits at least three problematic responses. The first simply sees the other as a *tabula rasa*, a person with no story, no selfhood, no history. This response was common in certain missionary endeavours in the past. Many intrepid souls came to “darkest” Africa to bring the light of the gospel and then, on encountering the indigenous people whom they clearly found to be very “other”—that is other than themselves—sadly failed to understand local stories, cultures and traditions to such an extent that they did not truly see the selfhood of these people. Difference was made over into sameness, in this case into the image of the missionary colonist, in the cause of the moment. The underlying text is: “You should be like me. But, as you are not like me, remember that I am the center, the fixed point by which you and ‘the rest’ will be defined.” This is the language of dominant power. In reality, there is no one center. There never was—except in the delusions of certain dominant philosophies and political systems. There are many centers.⁵ To acknowledge, to accept and be willing to live with difference and otherness is to admit that there are a myriad of centers.

A second response is a familiar one in today’s world. The other is experienced as a threat. The poisonous *apartheid* mentality of Afrikaner nationalism, the genocidal activities of the Nazis and the Hutus, the intransigent otherness of the Serbs, Bosnians, and Croats, and all racist and sexist attitudes, are contemporary examples of otherness as threat. Those in power say: “Only we have the truth and those who are different are our enemy.” When the other is a threat the strategy is to

separate people and then, increasingly, to dominate and to demonize them.

Lastly, there is a response which is manifested in two distinct yet similar ways: The other is either seen as some exotic, romantic being who does not have to be taken seriously since she or he is so different, or the other is seen as a universal category of person with no particularity. The nineteenth-century western idea of the “noble savage,” or the unthinking assumptions in the early days of the women’s movement that saw “women” as a one large unspecified category of human beings, are examples of this kind of thinking. Both are pernicious and unacceptable. In failing to acknowledge difference and otherness, we make the other into a romantic ideal or a universal category, rather than regarding them as specific persons. By dominating others, we determine their reality. We never afford the other the dignity of being engaged as a real person in all her or his difference.

Unraveling Difference and Otherness

With these problematic responses to difference and otherness, the question arises: How do we understand difference and otherness in all their complexity, ambiguity, and possibility?

To speak of the other is to speak of space, boundaries, time, difference, our bodies, cultures, traditions, ideologies, and beliefs. To speak of the other is to speak of that other human being whom I may mistakenly have assumed to be just like me and who, in fact, is not like me at all. To speak of the other is to be open to otherness within myself, to the possibility of a foreigner within my own

unconscious self.⁶ To speak of the other is to speak of poverty and justice, of human sexuality, of gender, race, and class. To speak of the other is to acknowledge that difference is problematic, often threatening, even alienating, and that we do not always live easily or well with it.⁷

To speak about the other is to speak about the nature of the church, the one body of many parts, challenged to unity in Jesus Christ. To speak of the Other is to speak about the ambiguity of God, the One who is Wholly Other and Wholly Related. We must always be alert to the reality of difference. It will not go away, neither should it.⁸ It is who we are. The call to full humanity is a call which takes place within the reality and the challenge of difference and otherness.

As members of the Anglican communion we recognize the reality and the deep ambiguities of difference. We are made up of an abundance of diverse peoples, from far flung places, with different traditions, histories, culture, and languages. Yet we see ourselves as one communion in Jesus Christ, one of the branches of Christianity, which is itself but one (and a minority at that) of the many religious traditions in the world. Difference and otherness are our reality. It is often a painful reality.

At this moment the unity within our communion is again under pressure as we are confronted with the obdurately recurring issue of gender and the current debates on sexual orientation. The nature of the ordained ministry, our ecclesiology, our theologies on what it means to be human, are central to these two hugely important matters. While we

continue to wrestle with these questions, and wrestle we must, there are equally weighty concerns which also demand our attention: the deep hunger and need for debt relief in the Third World and the implications of globally imposed economic planning for the poor of the world;⁹ the frightening accelerated pace at which our environment is being destroyed by human greed, arrogance and thoughtlessness; the ever-increasing violence perpetrated against women and children everywhere; human rights abuses; the impact of biomedical technology on people's lives; these are urgent and pressing issues which are moral imperatives for our church, wherever it finds itself. Why? Because at heart these matters are all human issues in their origins and in their solutions. They are issues of difference and otherness and of relationship.

As we struggle to find our way through all these imperatives, we realize that we no longer have "one language and the same words" (Gen. 11:1). Alerted to the reality and the demands of difference, what are we to do? How can we forge relationships across our differences?

An Ethic of Relationship

What is meant by relationship?¹⁰ Although relationship is central to our being and to our well-being, it is difficult to define. It is easier to say what relationship is not: it is not alienation or apathy, isolation, or separation. We are not made to live alone. Relationship is what connects us to one another like the strands of a web, spinning out in ever widening circles, fragile and easily damaged, yet filled with tensile strength. Relationships shape us as individuals and as members of our

communities. In the words of ethicist Beverly Harrison, “relationality is at the heart of all things.”¹¹

There is an African saying which declares: “A person is a person through other persons.”¹² This articulates what we call *ubuntu*. This traditional African philosophy and way of life sees all of creation as sacred. Humanity is part of a vast interrelated web. As John Mbiti has put it so strikingly: “I belong therefore I am.”¹³ In this boundless human web I acquire my humanity as something which comes to me as a gift. My humanity is found, shaped and nurtured in and through the humanity of others. I can only exercise my humanity by being in relationship with others, and there is no growth, happiness, or fulfilment for me apart from other human beings.¹⁴ Finally, because of this notion of a universal human web of relationships, no one is a stranger.¹⁵ Archbishop *emeritus* Desmond Tutu comments:

a solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. A totally self-sufficient human being is ultimately subhuman. We are made for complementarity. I have gifts that you do not; and you have gifts that I do not. *Voilà!* So we need each other to become fully human.¹⁶

This idea is not foreign to European thought. It was already present in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and has been developed in the twentieth-century philosophies of, among others, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, John MacMurray,¹⁷ and Paul Ricoeur.¹⁸ Feminist theologians such as Carter Heyward, Beverly Harrison, Elizabeth Johnson, and Catherine Keller¹⁹ have also written about women’s brand of *ubuntu*. Yet the concept of

relationship is still in striking contrast to much western thinking with its emphasis on individualism and self-sufficiency as a mark of the mature person. The move from the rational Cartesian man (and I mean “man”) at the center of the universe, is yet to be completed.

Not all relationships are good. Relationships can be oppressive. Personal relationships are often the terrain in which abusive power is exercised.²⁰ The idea of relationship needs to be qualified. For relationships to be right, loving, and just, they have to be mutual and reciprocal. Fully human relationships cannot be one-sided. They can only be created out of mutual interdependence and they flourish only when both parties work on them. The concept of *mutuality in relationship* is the touchstone against which the quality of our relationships is tested. Mutuality is concerned with the feelings, needs, and interests of the other.²¹ Mutuality spells forbearance, generosity, kindness, forgiveness, and considerateness, virtues often neglected.²² *Mutuality is the reciprocal interdependence of equals.* Interdependence and equality are the opposite of egocentricity—the concern for self at the expense of the other. The practice of mutuality is a way of loving which affirms the goodness of each person and our need for one another.

Mutual relationship does not do away with difference. Each person is a distinct individual who acts, thinks, and feels in relation to the other’s actions, thoughts, and feelings. The other remains truly other. Respect for the other, or lack of it, is a matter of intention. You choose whether you will respect me despite our differences across race, ideology, sexual orientation, and culture; I choose whether I will respect you.

Our qualities as people are the qualities of our relationships and our communities. As we are agents, our actions are motivated by our intentions, or lack of them. The challenge of making and maintaining relationship lies in our attentiveness, our willingness, our intention to truly know the other.

If we do not act in relationship there is no hope for the building of community.²³ Community is the result of mutual relationships as well as the place in which these relationships are put to the test.²⁴ Being a “community in difference is a hard-won achievement.”²⁵ All communities have to deal with the failure of their members to support each other and the common good. Those communities which are strong enough, and I would like to think that the church is such a community, can deal with the troubles and betrayals which afflict them. If the community is too fragile and too many betrayals have taken place, such a community can wither and die.²⁶ Community does not just happen. It takes recognition of our interdependence and willingness to carry our differences into what African-American theologian Shawn Copeland describes as “deep-going conversion and serious honest conversation—speaking with head and heart and flesh; listening with head and heart and flesh.”²⁷

The years of oppression in South Africa have taught me valuable lessons about the nature of community. Apartheid created mistrust, suspicion, and hatred among people, destroying communities by grandiose projects of social engineering serving the interests of white minority rule. The more natural processes of urbanization were prevented by laws governing the movements of people. As enforcement of

these laws relaxed, people flocked to the larger centers in huge numbers, creating slum-like informal settlements on the outskirts of towns and cities. Here, against the odds, people are again trying to re-create community.

New communities were also forged in resistance to apartheid. Ecumenism and inter-religious cooperation flourished among those opposing apartheid. Now apartheid is officially dead. Ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation, except in selected pockets, is waning.²⁸ We are learning a more profound and painful lesson about community. Now that the common cause which united many of us is gone, we need to create conditions of justice and fairness in order to have continued relationships. As long as the great disparity in wealth among peoples exists in South Africa, our dream of a truly democratic community will evade us. Nevertheless, people’s desire for community even in the most abject conditions of poverty and need, remains a miracle. I continue to be awed by this primal desire as much as I know how fragile and elusive making community can be.

In summary, *the problem of difference and otherness is the problem of relationship*. To be fully human is to live with relatedness. To love is to be in relationship. To do justice is to be in right relationship.²⁹ Relationships are not optional.³⁰ We do not live self-contained, self-directed and undisturbed existences. This is no quiet time. It is up to us to determine the nature of our relationships and our communities. How can our Christian beliefs help us to choose “full humanity”?

A Theological Perspective on an Ethic of Relationship in Difference and Otherness

We worship a triune God. There is a dialogue within God; among Father, Son, and Spirit. Ours is a Trinity which is in relation. However, the mutual self-giving relationship of the Trinity does not mean that Father, Son, and Spirit are collapsed into one undifferentiated divinity. Each member of the Trinity acts as an agent. Each one of the divine persons of the Trinity gives of the self to the other while at the same time each reflects the presence of the other.³¹ For us this means that we have a “God who came into the world so as to make human beings, created in the image of God, live with one another and with God in the kind of communion in which divine persons live with one another.”³²

Our God is, in turn, in mutual and reciprocal relationship with each one of us, with our community of faith, with all other faith communities and with the whole of creation. It is God’s desire for relationship which offers us the potential of being in relationship with God, ourselves, each other, and with all that God has made.

This understanding of God-in-relation with humanity permeates the stories in our scriptures. In the beginning God saw that all was good. Adam and Eve also saw one another as good and were fully human together without difference-as-domination clouding their mutual relationship. Then the picture changes. Alienated otherness enters Eden. God calls out: “Where are you?” The man replies “I was afraid...I hid myself... She gave me fruit from the tree.” The woman says: “The serpent tricked me, and I ate” (Gen. 3:9-13). Instead of the sound of God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze being the preamble to the

enjoyment of continued relationship, there is now blame, hostility, and estrangement. This vivid tale and many others in the Hebrew scriptures continue to tell of the striving for restored relationship with God and with each other. People argue and wrestle with God, are disobedient and repentant, are punished and blessed by God, are far from God or close enough to see the back of God pass by. We have a picture of a God intensely in relation with us.

In the covenant tradition, God expressly confirms a relationship of love, faithfulness, and of presence with humanity. We, in turn, struggle to live up to God’s covenanting love. Sadly, our understanding of covenant has often degenerated into religious chauvinism. Christian attempts to exclude Jews from the “new” covenant have, for instance, tragically resulted in the scandal of anti-Semitism and its history of atrocities. Pascal warned us that “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”³³

God’s covenant relationship with us is loving and just. As the righteous community (that is, as a community rightly related to God), we are called to express our covenantal relationship with God in loving and just relationships, particularly through our concern for those who are on the margins and who are not well placed to defend their own interests.³⁴ Love without just actions borders on the merely pious. Justice without love is cold legalism. Sin is all that prevents, impairs, and destroys our relationships with God, with one another and with creation. Conversely, we damage and destroy the other when we refuse to be in relationship with her or him. The promise of the covenant is a promise of mutual

relationship, in which unconditional love, ongoing presence, justice, peace, and wholeness will flourish.

This promise is continued in Jesus' vision of what life would be like when God's reign comes in its fullness. We, as baptized citizens of this new time, are responsible for making its values visible in our actions. Jesus spells out our calling: mutual loving relationships with God and with our neighbor as ourselves.³⁵ For Christians, Jesus' radical life-changing love is *the example of how to live in the world in a way "that deepens relation, embodies and extends community, [and] passes on the gift of life."*³⁶

Finally, Paul's writings describe authentic existence (or full humanity) in a number of ways. He is fond of using organic images to explain our relationship to Christ: "Believers are 'grafted into' him (Rom. 6:5) or are 'rooted' in him (Col. 2:7).... The dominant image, however, is that of the living human body. Believers are members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17; 12:2-27; Rom. 12:4-5)...."³⁷ Paul, well aware of the multiplicity of the body, is primarily concerned with its inner unity and harmony. He understands the Body of Christ as a living unity, not just a collection of people assembled for some purpose. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor writes:

[The Body of Christ] was unified by a shared life derived from a single vital principle, [namely] Christ. What the physical body suggested to Paul was the idea of *coexistence* in the strict sense of that much abused term because this conveyed perfectly his understanding of authenticity.³⁸

Authentic existence is living as a fully human part of a whole in mutual relationship,

participating, not possessing, needing one another, knowing that we belong to one another.

The Practice of Christian Relationship

The notion of practice is at the heart of living the gospel.³⁹ "Practice is...the medium through which we act out our moral values and by which they are evaluated."⁴⁰ *Faithful Christian practice can only be ethical, effective, and relevant if it takes seriously the challenge of relationship in difference and otherness.* I believe that the moral calamity of this age lies in our lack of a shared moral framework as well as in our inability to implement the moral criteria we do share. What would an ethic of relationship mean in practice for us here at Lambeth and for the many communities from which we come? Where do we start?

The starting point for us is simply this: we shall have to confess and to lament our unwillingness to deal lovingly with neighbors who are different. We have not welcomed one another as Christ has welcomed us, for the glory of God (Rom. 15:7). Each day we disobey the command to love our neighbor, the "different other," as ourselves. Too often we stigmatize the other and thus refuse to be in relationship with her or him. In my country the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has offered South Africans the opportunity to confess and to lament. Perpetrators of human rights abuses from all sides of the political spectrum and those of us who benefitted unjustly in the past from positions of advantage, have been given the opportunity to confess and repent. Victims have been allowed to lament, telling their stories of terror

and pain.⁴¹ The place to start is with genuine confession and repentance for what we have done to “the other.”

If this sounds easy, let me assure you that it is not. For those of us who have been used to dominant power or whose souls and minds are closed by rigid ideologies and fear of the other, an epiphany is needed.⁴² Without an epiphany we live in a state of solipsism—quite literally as the sun of our own individual universe. Reality is merely and only the reality of my own consciousness.⁴³ The habit of putting the injunction “to love your neighbor as yourself” through hoops of devious reasoning, is deeply embedded. We forget that Jesus taught us that our neighbor is the radically other who is also the radically related. We forget that our neighbor has inviolable claims on us to be welcomed as Christ has welcomed us. There are of course no recipes for making epiphanies happen. But when an epiphany does happen, we are caught in “a traumatism of astonishment”⁴⁴ and radical change becomes conceivable.

Experiencing an epiphany helps us understand that mutual relationship is not an abstract theological truth. This is the second moment in a process of conversion to relationship. Mutual relationship is practiced with our entire being—our bodies, our emotions, and our minds—in what we see, hear, say, and do. The practice of relationship is both profoundly simple and formidably demanding. We are innately relational beings. We are also congenitally antagonistic. We have to learn and practice relational living in what we do with our bodies. How we worship, where we take communion, how we communicate with

one another, our care for those in need, are all bodily practices and not abstract ungrounded notions of community or pastoral care. Ethics are about what we do, moment by moment, day by day, in our bodies, as much in our political activities as in our personal relationships.

The third moment in the practice of mutual relationship comes when I turn my gaze from myself and “look” into the face of the other. It is you and I, they and we, seeing and being seen.⁴⁵ In the face of the other I see a true and authentic human being. We both reflect something of the image of God.⁴⁶ The practice of relationship means that I acknowledge that I am not complete unto myself. I see myself in the face of the other. I am not fully myself until I can see “me” in your face. You are the mirror of myself. I am the mirror of yourself. Only when we can see ourselves and each other are we fully human.⁴⁷

At the moment of truly seeing the other and being seen, surprised and illuminated, I am converted to relatedness and I hope that the other chooses to be in relationship with me. Then, and only then, do I begin to fathom the claims of justice and love that are made on me: by the hungry child, the abused woman, the refugee on a dusty road, those whose color or gender are different from mine, whose sexuality is not mine, whose ideologies are not mine, whose religion is not mine, whose community is at odds with mine. Seeing has to be reciprocal, because both parties must be equally involved for the benefit of each and of the relationship. I pray that here at Lambeth we may be granted the grace to truly see one another across our differences, respectfully according mutual dignity to one another. I pray too that we may have the courage to cast aside

our masks and allow ourselves to be truly seen.

The epiphany does not end here. In a fourth step, I am impelled toward the practice of relationship and am now open to “hear” the story of the other.⁴⁸ Our stories constitute our identity. We all have a narrative identity. “The final indignity for anyone is to be forbidden one’s own voice or be robbed of one’s own experience” writes David Tracy.⁴⁹ Many narratives are painful and for some their identities have been stolen, crushed or denied to the extent that their stories are silenced. Such circumstances are of course in themselves stories. Our stories reveal our differences—men and women of privilege, those who are marginalized, poor and silenced, gay and lesbian people, children, people with disabilities. We hear and speak different stories. Stories evoke dangerous memories.⁵⁰ Stories require the unflinching admission of participation in oppressive practices and systems.⁵¹ For me as a woman theologian who, while not seeking ordination for myself, has supported the cause of women’s ordination, this means hearing the stories of those men who are so opposed to women clerics that they are willing to leave the church. For me as a white South African it means opening myself to the stories of torment and terror told by fellow South Africans before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, stories which suck me into the abyss of human treachery, which evoke guilt, remorse, anger, accountability. Hearing these stories changes my story forever.

Telling our stories, hearing the stories of others, allows our stories to intersect. Sometimes they conflict, accuse, and even diverge greatly, sometimes they attract,

connect, and confirm. As our stories touch one another, they change, and we too are changed. There have been moments in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s hearings when the power of the stories of victims has not only confronted the willed ignorance of perpetrators, but has also brought about their confession and repentance. Looking into the face of the other, hearing the story of the other, is allowing the humanity of the other to touch and change my humanity.

Lastly, storytelling is a preamble to *ongoing conversation*. We acknowledge the differences between us and begin to seek common ground. We tell our stories across differences, for the sake of relationship in difference and otherness. “Conversation in its primary form is an exploration of possibilities in the search for truth.”⁵² We dare not cease the conversation. In South Africa, this truth is ever before us as we struggle to transform our society. Disagreements, incompatible interpretations of what truth is, even conflict should not deter us. Without conversation we retreat into our solipsisms, the “enemy of conversation.”⁵³ We become unable to respond to the call to full humanity. At best all we have is a “learned ignorance” of what it means to be a human being. To counter this danger, we do have the one certainty that there is *no full humanity without the other*.⁵⁴ My hope for us here is that there will be spaces for stories to be told and the willingness to continue our conversation. I share the Archbishop of Canterbury’s dream for a Lambeth Conference enriched by stories.⁵⁵ My further hope is that the conversation will reach beyond the boundaries of our communion to others who share our faith, to those of different religious persuasions,

to all who are concerned for a better world.

Hearing and speaking do not imply agreement. They demand responsibility.⁵⁶ An ethic of responsibility is born out of the claims the other makes on me.⁵⁷ The extent of responsibility is infinite. When the other calls I cannot avoid responding. I must answer this call. If I refuse I am reduced to my own egocentric totality, where I am once again *the center* and you are on the margins. Numbers of white South Africans who were supporters of the former government have refused to be part of the Truth and Reconciliation process. Opting to avoid responsibility has removed them from the conversation. It has also retarded, if not destroyed, their chances of healing from the wounds that racism inflicts on its perpetrators as well as jeopardized the process of reconciliation in our society.⁵⁸ Our ethical relations shape the public realm. Once I hear the story of the other,⁵⁹ my ethical obligations to the other open into wider questions of social justice.⁶⁰ To “welcome one another” is not a luxury, but a necessity, for Christ has welcomed us. To live justly in the plurality of human beings that make up community is “to the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7).

Difference and Oneness in the Eucharist

Here at Lambeth we have different agendas, often strongly held different views, different stories, different fears, and different hopes. We too need an epiphany to practice mutual relationship with one another. Am I willing in the search for full humanity to repent and confess, to see myself mirrored in the face of the radically other, to speak across chasms of differences, to hear multiple stories, and to keep the conversation going even when I feel angry, ignored or

overwhelmed? If we believe that difference is no accident but rather a reality and a gift which challenges us to just and loving relationships, we will not be alone in our efforts to practice relationship and mutuality.

We are blessed as Christians to be a covenanted Eucharistic community. At the Lord’s table we are offered the consummate step in forging an ethic of relationship in difference and otherness. This visible, bodily practice of relationship with all its potential for healing is ours. Sadly, as the story from South African church history with which I began shows us, the Eucharist can be an occasion for disunity, domination and denial of community. However, through the Eucharist our relationship with the Word who became flesh, died on a cross and rose again, offers us relationship with those who are at the altar rail with us and with all who suffer and seek new life.

During those terrible years in my country when difference was used as category to exclude the majority of people from their rightful place, I learned the true challenge of “we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 12:12). Sharing the cup with a *bergie*⁶¹ seeking warmth in the cathedral, with street children who wander in looking for money to spend on bread or glue, with women and men across all racial and class divides, with the Nationalist politician whose ideology I despised, shattered the chains of the apartheid view of difference like a thunderbolt. I continue to remind myself of the power of the “one cup” as I stand next to the church council member whose sexist attitudes undermine vestry meetings and the cleric who believes that only men may consecrate the meal. I also stand next to the person I know is

HIV positive, the father carrying his daughter with tubes coming from her head, the friend who is riddled with cancer, and the pregnant mother seeking a blessing for her unborn child.

The bread and the wine have a healing power which extends beyond our more conventional celebrations. I am reminded here of the Zimbabwean Association of African Earthkeeping Churches. Before partaking of the Eucharist, members of these churches confess their ecological sins: tree-felling without planting in return, overgrazing, river bank cultivation which causes soil erosion, "...taking the good earth for granted, exploiting it without nurturing it or reverencing it in return."⁶² I can picture the communion table with its bread, wine and a number of tree-seedlings, the songs, the dancing, and the line of communicants approaching the table each with a seedling in hand who, after receiving the sacrament, go out and plant the little tree so that the earth can be re-covered.⁶³ Instead of treating the earth contemptuously as "the other," they set about redeeming our innate relatedness to creation.

Finally, I may never forget what "the result of the weakness of some" has done for "the cause of Christ" in my own country. The tragedy of

unreconciled difference and otherness played out over centuries in South Africa has not only been costly in terms of human well-being, but it has also been a betrayal of the gospel in the heart of the Christian church itself. We remind ourselves, therefore, that "all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves" (1 Cor. 11:29). The question for us as we deliberate on the seemingly disparate themes of human rights, the environment, human sexuality, modern technology, euthanasia and international debt, and economic justice is: how can I/we create, nurture, and sustain mutual relationships across difference and otherness? Conversely put: how do my actions, thoughts and beliefs hinder relationships across differences?

For the Eucharist to have meaning in our lives, we need to feel its powerful pull to the radical activity of loving relationships with those who are different. The One who calls us to the table knows our differences. The One who issues the invitation and asks us to make peace with one another when we come, knows full well just how difficult that can be. The call to full humanity is nothing less than the call to grapple daily with the challenges, implications, and surprises of seeking to be in relationship with each other in all our difference and otherness, in the fullness of our humanity.

NOTES

1 This fragment is taken from John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), 8-9.

2 Jacob Neusner, "Thinking about 'The Other' in Religion: It is Necessary, but is it Possible?" in *Lectures in Judaism in the History of Religions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 17 writes: "The single most important problem facing religion for the next hundred years...is...how to think through difference, how to account, within one's own faith and framework, for the outsider, indeed for many outsiders."

3 See Collette Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1995), 250 who points out that "difference" comes from a Latin verb (*fero*) which means 'to carry,' 'to orient.' Difference adds the idea of dispersion (*di*) to this orientation; we say 'to differ from.' What is important is the little *from...* The kernel of the meaning is the distance from a centre, the distance from a referent (still *fero*).

4 Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 1.

5 David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 4.

6 See Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

7 M. Shawn Copeland, "Difference as a Category in Critical Theologies for the Liberation of Women" in E. S. Fiorenza and M. S. Copeland, eds., *Feminist Theology in Different Contexts*, Concilium 1996/1 (London: S.C.M. Press, 1996), 143, writes: "Difference insinuates not merely variance, but deviation, division, discrepancy, discord, incongruity, incompatibility, inconsistency, anomaly, contrariety, aberration and misunderstanding." She adds: "...difference carries forward struggle for life in its uniqueness, variation and fullness; difference is a celebrative option for life in all its integrity, in all its distinctiveness."

8 Paul Varo Martinson, "What Then Shall We Do?" in F. W. Klos, C. L. Nakamura, and D. F. Martensen, eds., *Lutherans and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), 179 warns: "We must always be alert to difference. The common makes relationship possible, difference makes it significant. Generally people do not give their lives for that upon which we all agree or find we have in common. People give their lives because of that which is different. Difference is fraught with significance."

9 In Africa the implications of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) policies are a case in point. Despite the fanfare which accompanied the launch of the Highly Indebted Poor Country Initiative (HIPC) in 1996, countries like Mozambique, Burkina Fasso, Côte d'Ivoire, Tanzania have yet to experience its dubious benefits. At present, for example, Tanzania spends nine times as much on servicing its debts as on basic health care and four times as much as on primary education. Mozambique which has gone through a tortuous qualification process has been promised SAR 14.5 billion in debt-relief. Yet next year this country will still have to pay SAR 500 million (a 16% increase on the previous year) in debt servicing because of the IMF's way of linking export ratios to determining relief (*Cape Times*, 23 April 1998).

10 See Ruthellen Josselson, *The Space Between Us: Exploring the Dimensions of Human Relationships* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992), 2-3, where she observes that the word "relationship" has become hackneyed. "When people speak of 'having a relationship,' they are usually referring to a sexual partnership. Relationships are to be 'had' rather than created in the flow of intention, action and response between people." See also pp. 4-10 where she sets out eight dimensions of relatedness which form the core of her book.

11 Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 15. See also the work of the Stone Center in regard to the "self-in-relation": Jean Baker Miller, "The Development of Women's Sense of Self" and Janet L. Surrey, "The 'Self-in-Relation': A Theory of Women's Development," both in Judith V. Jordan et al., *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), 11-26, 51-66. Apart from feminist theorists and theologians who have propagated the idea of relationship as central to our understanding of being human beings in communities, a concern for

community has also been the focus of recent writings by men. See Christian ethicists, Larry Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church and Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) and Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), and the historical/sociological critique of American Society in Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), as well as the moral philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre, especially his *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

12 *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.*

13 Quoted from Luke L. Pato, "Family and Human Sexuality from the Perspective of an African World-View," unpublished paper presented to pre-Lambeth discussion group, October 1995.

14 A critique of *ubuntu* among some African intellectuals is that it can have the effect of "levelling" people to one accepted norm which can stifle individuality.

15 For a discussion on *ubuntu* and *seriti* (force, power) which enable us to live in relatedness, see also Augustine Schutte, "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu: An African Conception of Humanity" in P. J. Hartin et al., eds., *Becoming a Creative Local Church: Theological Reflections on the Pastoral Plan*, a project commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of Southern Africa (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1994), 185-200.

16 Desmond Tutu, *An African Prayer Book* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), xiv.

17 In the early 1960's, the Scots philosopher John MacMurray attempted to offer a counter to modern European philosophy's preoccupation with the self understood primarily as a thinker, inactive in the world. In *Persons in Relation* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1991), 28, he formulates his basic thesis: "I exist as an individual only in a personal relation to other individuals." We can isolate ourselves from others intentionally so that our relation to others becomes impersonal. In consequence I can, as MacMurray points out, treat you as object, refusing the personal relationship. This is what torturers do to their victims—making them objects in an

impersonal relationship and refusing to "know" the victims. We can only know other persons by entering into a relationship with them.

18 Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1958); Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, tr. K. Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Externality*, tr. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

19 See Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Lanham: University of America Press, 1982); Harrison, *Making the Connections*; Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994); Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

20 See Human Rights Watch/Africa's Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Project, *Violence Against Women In South Africa: State Response to Domestic Violence and Rape* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1995), 44-59, where the magnitude of the problem of domestic violence and rape are described.

21 See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 51: "If men and women are equal, it is not because they are different, but because overriding the difference are some properties, common or complementary, which are of value. They are beings capable of reason, or love, or memory, or dialogical recognition. To come together on a mutual recognition of difference—that is, of the equal value of different identities—requires that we share more than a belief in this principle; we have to share also some standards of value on which the identities concerned check out as equal."

22 Cf. Gal. 5:22-23. See also Josselson, *The Space Between Us*, 149, who describes mutuality as existing "on a continuum from simple companionship to an intermingling of souls." Explaining why mutuality should be pleasurable, she adds "mutuality appears to be the expression of our fundamentally social nature—an evolutionary disposition, human and emergent, simply to 'be with' others."

23 See Linell E. Cady, "Relational Love: A Feminist Christian Vision" in Paula M. Cooey, Sharon A. Farmer and Mary Ellen Ross, eds., *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values* (San

Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 141, where she writes: "In a community persons retain their identity, and they also share a commitment to the continued well-being of the relational life uniting them."

24 Copeland, "Difference as Category," 149 writes "...authentic community emerges in the strenuous effort to understand common and different experiences; to interrogate those differences, commonalities and interdependencies rigorously; to reach common judgments; to realize and sustain interdependent commitments."

25 Copeland, "Difference as Category," 149.

26 Cady, "Relational Love," 141. See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, tr. J. W. Doberstein (London: S.C.M. Press, 1970), 15-16 where he warns of the dangers and transience of Christian community which springs from a wish dream rather than one which is bound in Jesus Christ.

27 Copeland, "Difference as Category," 149.

28 In the Western Cape where I live, for instance, religious bodies are getting together to combat the endemic violence which reigns in our region.

29 According to Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 89, the definition of justice is the relation to the other. See also John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 15-18.

30 See Paul R. Sponheim, *Faith and the Other: A Relational Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 25: "We are beings in relationship. We live on boundaries. If we dig beneath the boundaries of life, we will find relationships."

31 See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 176-81.

32 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 181.

33 Tracy, *On Naming the Present*, 86, cited from Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 8.

34 Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 177.

35 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, tr. J. Bowden

(London: Collins, 1966), 31: "The question 'Who are you?' occurs in daily life.... It is the question about the other man and his claim, about the other being, the other authority. It is the question about love for one's neighbour. The questions of transcendence and existence become a personal question. That means that man cannot answer the question 'Who?' by himself." It is the priority of the "Who?" question that directs Bonhoeffer's Christology, see Dirkie J. Smit, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and 'The Other,'" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 93 (1995): 3-16.

36 Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 18.

37 Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Becoming Human Together: The Pastoral Anthropology of St. Paul*, Good News Series 2, 2nd rev. ed. (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1982), 178.

38 Murphy-O'Connor, *Becoming Human*, 179.

39 See Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996), 112-41.

40 McIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

41 See Antjie Krog, *Country of my Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), in which the author, a white Afrikaner woman, documents two years of reporting on the TRC.

42 See Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 189.

43 See Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 34-36.

44 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 74.

45 I am aware of the fact that not everybody can see or hear physically. Insight and knowledge are, however, not just or primarily physical.

46 Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 9, writes: "...the idea of God is in me as the very mark of the author upon his work, a mark that assures the resemblance between us."

47 Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 3, describes this experience as follows: "...the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other..."

48 See Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 140-68.

49 David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 106.

50 See Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Society* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 89.

51 See Mab Segrest, "A Bridge Not a Wedge" in *Memoir of a Race Traitor* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 229-246 in which the author examines the need for the gay and lesbian movements in the United States to deal with this country's racist history and attitudes in the struggle for justice.

52 Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 20.

53 Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 25.

54 Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 78, reminds us: "...our hope...is grounded in conversation.... Otherness has entered, and it is no longer outside us among the 'others.' The most radical otherness is within. Unless we acknowledge that, it will be impossible for us to responsibly participate in, or meaningfully belong to, our history."

55 See *Anglican World*, no. 89, 20.

56 Andrius Valevicius, *From the Other to the Totally Other: The Religious Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 60, comments: "Responsibility is both a form of recognition and an act. It is an acknowledgement of the claim which the Other has upon me and it is an expressive act by which I expose myself, expressing my own Being to the Other."

57 Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*, 189 argues that Levinas' ethical response to the face of the other (*le visage d'autre*) is too restrictive, it is a "face [which] forbids murder and commands justice." While agreeing that the self is summoned to responsibility by the other, he emphasizes the dialectic of giving and receiving found in the resource of *goodness*. "...it is, in fact, noteworthy that in many languages goodness is at one and the same time the ethical quality of the aims of action and the orientation of the person toward others, as though an action could not be held to be good unless it were done on behalf of others, out of *regard* for others."

58 See Denise M. Ackermann, "On Hearing and Lamenting: Faith and Truth Telling" in H. R. Botman and R. M. Petersen, eds., *To Remember and to Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1996), 47-56.

59 See Farley, *Good and Evil*, 35: "The other, then, is what I do not and cannot experience in the mode in which I experience myself. It is an 'I' which is not *I*."

60 Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 225-26. See also Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 47, "Justice is prior to freedom in moral experience."

61 Homeless people who live on the slopes of Table Mountain, Cape Town, are known as *bergies*, which means "people of the mountain."

62 M. L. Daneel, "African Independent Churches Face the Challenge of Environmental Ethics," *Missionalia* 21 (November 1993): 321.

63 Daneel, "African Independent Churches," 325-27.

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